

Rabbi backs remark by his son, a far-right minister, that nuking Gaza is an option

Top Safed rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, no stranger to controversy, says authorities can't fire him for echoing comments that got Minister Amichai Eliyahu suspended from cabinet meetings

By **TOI STAFF**

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Chief Rabbi of Safed Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu speaks at the 'Besheva' group, on February 7, 2022. (Olivier Fitoussi/Flash90)

The chief rabbi of Safed, whose government minister son raised a ruckus with the [suggestion](#) that dropping a nuclear weapon on the Gaza Strip could be a viable option, backed the radical idea and challenged authorities to punish him for it in a speech Monday.

Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu was quick to walk back his comments as "metaphorical" after they sparked an international outcry and internal coalition sanctions earlier this month, but in a weekly lecture on the Torah portion delivered Monday, Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu appeared to take up the idea with gusto.

EXHIBIT

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“There’s now much discussion on what to do with Gaza. To erase them? What is going to be done? Drop an atom [bomb] on them? It’s an option,” the rabbi said, smiling during a digression in the talk.

“They won’t fire me,” he continued. “My son, they wanted to [fire], but me they won’t.”

A video of the Jerusalem speech, titled “How to defeat Ishmael’s kingdom,” was [uploaded to YouTube](#) late Monday by the rabbi’s office. The biblical Ishmael is used by some Orthodox Jews to refer to Arabs, often derogatorily.

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The elder Eliyahu, a prominent figure on the radical fringe of Israel’s right-wing nationalist movement, has generated criticism in the last several years for a variety of statements and rulings on Jewish law, including one that forbade the rental or sale of Jewish-owned property in the northern city of Safed to Arabs.



Otzma Yehudit MK Amichai Eliyahu speaks in the Knesset on December 6, 2022. (Noam Moskowitz/Knesset)

The rabbi has also drawn censure for criticizing the Reform movement, the LGBTQ community and women serving in IDF combat units, but remains a potent political force. Last year, the US suspended the rabbi's visa in reaction to his comments.

On November 5, his son, a member of National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir's far-right Otzma Yehudit party, was giving a radio interview when a host asked him whether "your expectation is that tomorrow morning we'd drop what amounts to some kind a nuclear bomb on all of Gaza, flattening them, eliminating everybody there?"

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“That’s one way,” Eliyahu responded. “The second way is to work out what’s important to them, what scares them, what deters them... They’re not scared of death.”

He also appeared to defend collective punishment of Gazans, charging that “there is no such thing as uninvolved civilians in Gaza.”

The minister later attempted to walk back his assertion, tweeting that “it is clear to all sensible people that the statement about the atom [bomb] is metaphorical.”



A smoke plume erupts in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on November 14, 2023. (Said Khatib/AFP)

The comments from the younger Eliyahu, who does not have influence over the three-member war cabinet directing the war against the Hamas terror group, were quickly disavowed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and others.

Answering calls for Eliyahu to be fired, Netanyahu instead suspended him from cabinet meetings indefinitely, though he has continued to take part in phone votes held by the cabinet, which has rarely convened in person since war broke out last month.

Netanyahu initially sought to fire Eliyahu, but backpedaled after Ben Gvir said he would not go along with the move, Channel 12 news reported.

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Despite a series of scandals and calls for his removal over the years, Shmuel Eliyahu has remained chief rabbi in Safed since the late 1980s, though he has twice failed to be elected as Israel's chief Sephardic rabbi, a position his father held from 1983 to 1996. In 2020, the High Court of Justice ordered disciplinary action against Shmuel Eliyahu for making a series of offensive comments and for taking "explicit" political stances forbidden to him due to his status as a government employee.

In 2007, the father, former chief rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, wrote a letter to then-prime minister Ehud Olmert saying all Gazans should be considered

guilty for rocket attacks, and Shmuel Eliyahu said his father preferred “carpet bombing” Gaza rather than risking soldiers’ lives.

Many of Shmuel Eliyahu’s past comments have been construed as supporting or inciting violence against Arabs.

“A Jew should not flee from Arabs. A Jew should make the Arabs flee. There is a silent war going on here for land”; “Most of the violence in Israeli society stems from the Arabs”; and “The Arabs have a different code, and violent norms that have become an ideology” — were among the statements Eliyahu made in a 2010 interview with the Maariv daily.

In 2011, then-attorney general Yehuda Weinstein called for a criminal investigation into Eliyahu’s comments for suspected incitement, but by 2012, the Justice Ministry, then headed by Yaakov Neeman, closed all proceedings, citing lack of evidence.



Charred debris and objects are scattered inside a building in Kibbutz Alumim, following the October 7 attack by Hamas terrorists, in southern Israel near the Gaza Strip on October 18, 2023. (Gil Cohen-Magen/AFP)

Israel launched its war against Hamas after the terror group carried out a brutal assault on southern Israel communities, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking over 240 hostages, including small children and the elderly.

In response to the killings, Israel vowed to eradicate the terror group and has since hit thousands of Hamas targets inside the Strip with airstrikes and an ongoing ground operation, saying that it is working to minimize civilian casualties in Gaza.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza says more than 11,000 Palestinians have been killed. The figures, which cannot be independently confirmed, do not differentiate between terror operatives and civilians nor between those killed in Israeli strikes and those killed by rockets fired by terror groups that have fallen short inside the Strip.

Israel maintains a policy of official ambiguity around its alleged nuclear weapons program, which has been reported on in the foreign press.